

Walt Whitman

To a Stranger

Passing stranger! you do not know how longingly I look upon you,
You must be he I was seeking, or she I was seeking, (it comes to me as of a dream,)
I have somewhere surely lived a life of joy with you,
All is recall'd as we flit by each other, fluid, affectionate, chaste, matured,
You grew up with me, were a boy with me or a girl with me,
I ate with you and slept with you, your body has become not yours only nor left my body
mine only,
You give me the pleasure of your eyes, face, flesh, as we pass, you take of my beard,
breast, hands, in return,
I am not to speak to you, I am to think of you when I sit alone or wake at night alone,
I am to wait, I do not doubt I am to meet you again,
I am to see to it that I do not lose you.

Analysis=

The speaker uses this poem as a silent address to a stranger passing by him on the street. He expresses the belief that he and this stranger (whose gender remains undefined) know each other from another life. The speaker reminds the stranger of all the experiences they shared together and how close they once were. They grew up together; they ate and slept together. Their emotional intimacy matched their physical closeness. In the present, however, the two are strangers, and their former closeness is now just a hint of a memory.

They pass by one another without a word, but the speaker describes a silent exchange between them. Each one notices the other's body, bodies that were close in a past life but are now physically distant. The speaker ends by stating that he cannot directly address the stranger in this life. Instead, he must think of the stranger in solitude, hoping to meet again one day so that the memory of their relationship does not fade entirely. The speaker takes on the responsibility of keeping their spiritual connection alive.

Whitman wrote this poem in his typical free-verse style. It consists of one ten-line stanza. Whitman also uses his signature list structure to invoke the connection between the speaker and the stranger: "you give me the pleasure of your eyes, face, flesh, as we pass, you take of my beard, breast, hands, in return." Similar to "I Sing the Body Electric," Whitman uses this list of physical assets to form the connection between the body and the soul. He writes, "[Y]our body has become not yours only, not left my body mine only," he claims. The relationship between body and soul is a frequent theme in Whitman's work. Whitman draws on the ideas of Transcendentalism to emphasize the spiritual connection between physical body and nature.

"To a Stranger" is similar to Whitman's earlier poem "To You." In both poems, Whitman expresses astonishment at the societal norm of polite reserve between strangers. "To You" questions why it is inappropriate to address a stranger if both parties are willing, but in "To a Stranger" the speaker interprets an unspoken connection with a stranger to mean that they shared a past life. Despite this connection, though, the speaker acknowledges that it would

not be proper to directly address the stranger, simply because they are strangers. All he can do is hold onto the hope that their spiritual connection will lead to a physical connection in another life.

Whitman invokes the idea of the democratic self in this poem by leaving the stranger's gender indeterminate. Due to this lack of specificity, the stranger represents anyone and everyone. Whitman uses the ambiguity of the subject's identity to extend his tenderness towards humanity in general. Therefore, the connection between these strangers extends far beyond the boundaries of the speaker's own life.

The voice of the speaker certainly represents Whitman's own opinions (as it does in many of his poems) However, it also represents the democratic self, which allows Whitman to identify with the reader more strongly. Whitman often treats the reader as a character in his poems in order to achieve his goal of his poetry functioning as a democratizing force.